

From hooking up to breaking up—

THE *Curable* ROMANTIC

*Advice for the
Romance-Impaired*



Katharine!

Published by Sparkling Observationalist

sparklingobservationalist.com

thatkatharine.com

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06 15 09 4 3 2 Second Edition

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ISBN: 978-0-9813866-0-7

Dedicated to the Secret Boyfriend, who is neither secret nor a boyfriend.

acknowledgements

Most sincere thanks are extended to all who read through earlier drafts of this collection and shared their insights and opinions. Special thanks to Jeff Truelsen and Kristian Truelsen for their assistance, suggestions, and humor. And heartfelt appreciation to my editor Patricia Sterling, for her expert micro-editing skills.

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introduction

Most people who stumble upon this book will ask “Aren’t there enough books doling out fake advice about relationships?”

To that I reply: Yes, there are...now.

I am not a love guru, sexpert, or world famous advice columnist. I have no degrees in social or personal behavior. I’m just an average girl with some observations and possible solutions based on real-world dating experiences. This book is intended to shed light on common cupid quandaries and rare romantic woes.

We’re all a little romance-impaired in some way. Otherwise we’d have fewer self-help books and sappy love songs. The road to love is bumpy. Hell, the road within love is bumpy, steep, and full of sharp curves.

The Curable Romantic strives to go beyond the typical gender stereotypes to uncover human truths. Whether you’re straight, gay, bisexual, transsexual, asexual, man, woman, or something in between, you’ve been in love at some point. The content does tend toward the heterosexual most times, but hopefully you can look beyond pronouns to find the key to a less dysfunctional relationship.



just say no to love

Love—it's a word that is potentially dangerous and can have serious repercussions. Some of you may have heard about it or seen it on television. Some of your parents may have been in love. You may have already been in love yourself.

Tune out the hype and listen up. Love is a full-time addiction. Oh, it starts out small with a seemingly harmless crush. But soon, you're hooked and looking for something stronger. You're enamored, lustful, and filled with desire, all leading up to the hardest drug of all: *l'amour*.

Love can happen at any time, in any place. Mr. or Ms. Wonderful enters your life and it begins. You discover that you enjoy the same kinds of music and motion pictures. You find your special song on the jukebox at the local diner. Soon, he needs more. She needs a commitment. You're lost in a moment and it slips out: "I love you." And it's such a rush to say it. You say it again followed by empty promises of

forever. You believe in it, like the tooth fairy or Santa Claus or that the Cubs will win the World Series.

Before you can stop it, you're latched onto a person and losing interest in other things, like eating, bathing, or working. Sure, it's great at first, like any high. But soon you find yourself in a loop of questions. "Where is he? What's she doing? Who's he with? Will he call me today? What will we do tonight? Does she love me as much as I love her? Will he always love me? Will I get laid?" This is often followed by unexplainable rashes, nausea, and very annoyed friends.

It causes you to do things you wouldn't ordinarily do, like serenade a woman outside her apartment building on a moonlit night, leave the toilet seat down, or rummage through bargain basements searching for Barry Manilow's Greatest Hits.

Love has been the leading cause of marriage, making out in parked cars, suicide, and bad poetry by 13-year-old girls. But even armed with the knowledge of the side effects, people still insist on falling in love. And no rehab clinic or 12-step program can cure it.

If you or someone you know has the following symptoms: loss of appetite, sleeplessness, glazed-over eyes, aloofness, and a fondness for Mellow Gold—you may be in love. Act quickly, get help, and just say no.

the curable romantic

The curable romantic is not anti-romance. Being a curable romantic isn't about eschewing the concept of love and related notions but about approaching such things in a more sensible fashion. It requires a willingness to put aside head games in favor of an honest connection.

If you encounter such a creature, don't try to win her over with traditional romantic gestures. To the curable romantic, flowers and candy are trite and cliché. She wants her suitors to customize their woos to fit her whims. And in the information age, there's little excuse for not gathering some background research and adding a personal touch to get one in return.

A curable romantic is also willing to pursue unconventional partners. She's not waiting for an idealized version of the perfect soul mate to trot up to her doorstep atop a trusty golden steed. She won't even wait for you to call the next day.

Staying sensible in matters of the heart can become a bit boring. While at one time willing to take a risk to obtain a relationship, she won't behave recklessly with that person should someone more exciting emerge from the ether. The curable romantic won't chase after Tom Hanks in the airport if she's got Bill Pullman already snuggled up beside her.

There's nothing wrong with being an incurable romantic. It's not a terminal affliction unless you're determined to die a spinster if you're not properly romanced by the perfect human specimen. Even the seemingly unromantic is guilty

of entertaining a romantic fantasy or two. It's nice to believe in things.

To cure yourself of being a romantic, you have to stop clinging to sappy sentiment. You may never meet your soul mate. Even if you do, he may not serenade you or whisk you away to some exotic paradise for crazy monkey sex. The curable romantic accepts these truths and lets go of any disappointment from unmet expectations. She appreciates her current companion and how he brings medicine and soup when she's sick. After all, it's the simple gestures of kindness and consideration that really make a relationship work, not flowers and monkey sex.



want and desire

Primary needs: food, water, and shelter. Once those needs are sated, we're free to focus on our wants and desires. Unfortunately, some wants have the potential to leave us homeless, penniless, and quoting Stuart Smalley. Especially if the particular object of desire is attractive and has expensive tastes.

The desire to be wanted is far stronger than any other. It's why we strive to look and smell nice and why we pursue certain careers or hobbies. We aim to be the best versions of ourselves in the hope that someone will swoon as we step into a room. Even if you don't find someone lust-worthy, it's always a little disappointing when the feeling is mutual. No matter how self-confident you may be, it's a blow if no one returns your meaningful gaze.

To further complicate matters, being ogled by the oldest man in the room isn't enough. We want to be wanted by the

person we've set our own sights on. If this weren't such a part of human nature, Shakespeare (or at least some of his actors) would be out of a job.

Desire isn't love. Attraction, lust, and desire are preludes to love, if you're lucky. Desire is what motivates most romances, and mutual desire is necessary for a successful one. One-sided desire makes for love of the unrequited sort. Where most people get into trouble is in playing games once a mutual level of desire is achieved. For some, it's not enough to be wanted by the object of their affections. The object's desire needs to be somehow stronger. The "I want you to want me, but I want you to want me more than I want you" game may make for some tempting romance novels but grows tiresome in reality. Regular boys are more likely to opt for someone with lower maintenance.

There is no immediate remedy for the desire to be someone's reason for existence. We can manage only our own desires. Once a mutual level of desire is achieved, don't feign disinterest to prove his affections are more intense than your own. It is not harmful to express your interest in a person. If someone strikes your fancy, tell him as much—even if your interest goes no further than physical attraction. Being the subject of desire—however fleeting—is flattering. Ego-stroking may not lead to heavy petting, but it adds a spring to the step anyhow.



pithy personality vs. phat physique

You were told that women love musicians, so you went out and started your own death metal band. Women claimed to appreciate a good sense of humor, so you brushed up on your “guy walks into a bar” repertoire. Still, ladies are just as guilty as men for checking out a nicely packaged member of the opposite sex.

Studies conducted by women’s magazines over the years reveal that women are in favor of personality. A good sense of humor will surely win the heart of a good woman. But who’s ever spotted someone across the room and said, “Hey, look at the sense of humor on that one? ”

While magazine studies may be able to pacify men, guys openly ogle scantily clad, well-built ladies. Their photos, though fun-to-look-at candy, reduce a regular girl to an

emotional basket case. The basket cases set impossibly high standards for themselves, based on what they believe you really want.

Eventually the cute dimples give way to road map wrinkles, but you're stuck with your personality forever. For the most part, women hope that it's a good one. If a woman intends to bed you, you must have some redeeming quality. A nice-guy attitude will get you further than being a jerk, especially if you're short on looks. Girls can justify sleeping with handsome hunks and lovable losers.

But appearance is still a factor. In recent years, men have taken more interest in their own appearance. With men presenting themselves in better fashions, women are taking notice. A well-dressed guy stands a better chance of scoring than a guy in a faded Metallica shirt and ripped jeans. Even if you weren't blessed with good genes, you can make up for it with clean jeans.

Women really crave substance. With that biological clock ticking, personality may not be the substance girls are necessarily looking for. A woman who's hoping to conceive a child may be less picky about her suitor's appearance as long as he's in good working order. Those of us who are not likely to marry or bear children are free to seek out other qualities such as money, fame, looks, or sterility.

So, what's more important: personality or looks? It's all a matter of taste. Practice good hygiene, read a few books, and pray that luck is on your side. If you feel yourself drawn to someone, chalk it up to chemistry. Or anatomy. Or biology. Just try not to dissect your date before you get to first base.



love at first sniff: pheromones and you

Kick off the stiletto heels and cancel the plastic surgery; take a shower instead. Apparently, we have glands that produce this stuff called pheromones, which, if used correctly, can attract a new lover better than any tight sweater.

Hey, What's that Smell?

Pheromone is the term used to name the chemical produced by an organism, generally insect or mammal, to alert other members of the same species of its presence. It is a naturally occurring substance that fertile bodies excrete externally in order to trigger a (hopefully sexual) response from the opposite sex in the same species. Pheromones are commonly odorless. That is, their smells are not usually received by the conscious brain but are sensed instead

through vomeronasal organs (VNO), located inside the nose, just behind the nostrils.

Pheromones and People

Scientists, long aware of the subliminal scent in animals and insects, have learned in recent years that humans are also driven by odors—odors that can accelerate puberty, control the menstrual cycle, influence sexual orientation, and tell you when it's time to do laundry.

Years of research and debate have shown that some pheromones are released through the armpits of both male and female sexes. But even though scientists have it all figured out, regular people still struggle with how and whom they find attractive. If we do emit and receive “chemical signals” from surrounding people, those signals compete and conflict with the other factors influencing our behavior.

Why do we find ourselves attracted to someone? We still rely on our other senses to lead us to potential mates. Women have been taught to look for physical attractiveness, a nice personality, a good sense of humor, money, etc. But maybe the nose (or VNOs) knows something that our mothers didn't.

A test conducted on 106 male subjects in which they were subjected to photographs, female voices, and four types of pheromone-related scents showed that one kind of pheromone called copulins (volatile fatty acids in vaginal secretions) produced a scent that rated higher with men than other odors. Now a woman who is dissatisfied with her looks can rest assured, knowing that she has a chance with a man as long as his VNO is still intact. The smells of copulins make optical attractiveness less of a factor for the male. So does taking off his glasses and stomping them into bits.

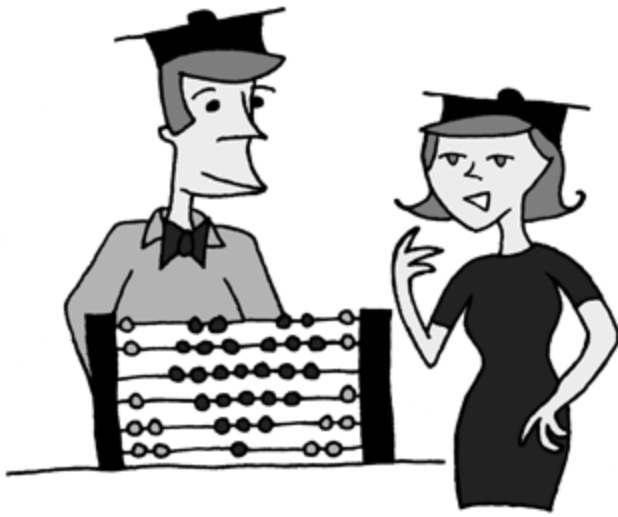
Copulins differ from the armpit pheromones in that they give off an unpleasant odor, yet the attractiveness ratings were higher among men who were smelling them than without when they were not.

Sniffing out Your Soul Mate

Are pheromones really effective in finding a suitable partner?

Response to pheromones is largely dependent on the VNO. If someone's vomeronasal organs have been removed due to injury or surgery, there will be little or no response. Also, not all pheromones promote sexuality. Some pheromones have been shown to decrease testosterone levels and the mating instinct.

Does this newfound knowledge give you the right to dump your loser boyfriend simply because he lets one rip? Only if you're not attracted to the stench.



love does not compute

Sally leaves her office on Main Street at 5:30 pm and drives north toward your place at 30 mph. If she continues at this speed, she will arrive in 17 minutes. If she speeds up to 45 mph, what time will Mary need to duck out the back entrance before Sally arrives?

Whoever said we'd never use math skills in real life obviously never had much of a love life. The early stages of a relationship are full of mathematical challenges. If X is the amount of money you spend on a date and Y is the number of hours you spend with your date, what equals you over him?

We're obsessed with numbers when they impact our romantic chances—the number of days one waits until calling, the number of sexual partners one has had, the number of orgasms one needs in order to count as multiple. In all counts, research shows that three is the magic number.

Three days is a little long to leave a girl to dissect the details of your date, but three hours reeks of desperation. Three is the number of former lovers you can admit to without leaving your current bedmate anticipating a trip to the clinic. In more promiscuous days, you might have been able to get away with confessing five to ten lovers. Any more, and you run the risk of overwhelming your new partner. (As a side note: experience doesn't necessarily indicate mastery of the mattress arts, so don't let those double digits intimidate you.)

If you're fortunate enough to survive the early months of a relationship, you still have to juggle birthdays and anniversaries, remember how many siblings your partner has, and be able to perform simple math in case of a punctuation crisis. Stick around long enough, and you may be lucky if you remember how many years you've been together.

We shouldn't need a calculator to fall in love, but it seems unlikely that we'll ever be able to shake our preoccupation with numbers in the romance department. All we can do is stay up on our multiplication tables and hope there's not a pop quiz on dividing fractions.



don't call me, i'll text you

The digital movement has revolutionized the dating world. The old rules no longer apply, and the waiting games are over. Expecting someone to wait three days for a phone call is unacceptable in the days of texting, social networking sites, and the slew of computers and mobile devices at your disposal.

From hooking up to breaking up, the Internet has changed the way couples communicate. For couples who want to stay in constant contact, it's a blessing. It's a bane to those firm "absence makes the heart grow fonder" believers. The ability to connect instantly has also eradicated our patience and some of the mysteries of romance.

Blind dates aren't such if you've friended on Facebook beforehand. And while the Google searches and Facebook/MySpace profile scans might alleviate some of the awkwardness of first dates, it also eliminates some of the

learning process. Questions you might've asked five or ten years ago are instantly answered on internet profiles. And some questions you'll never ask for fear of revealing how much online research you conducted prior to your meeting—like how many of her Facebook friends are ex-lovers and if he's the same xman867 who contributes spoilers to a *Days of Our Lives* forum.

The developers of web services and applications obviously did not factor in the delicate female psyche. Once you've invited potential suitors into your online life, it's impossible to avoid them. Even if you promised to call in a couple of days, they can still check your status updates, Twitter, and blog entries until they hear from you. And they will—obsessively—check for any veiled references to your dates and your feelings. Alternatively, they will check their email and voice mail repeatedly for messages from you. If he's changed his Facebook status five times, tweeted about his upcoming plans and hasn't contacted you personally, it's possible that he's no longer interested in you.

Internet communication doesn't affect only singletons and the newly dating. Established couples are also adjusting to the new modes of communication. If you're part of a couple—especially if you live together—is it necessary to use every method of communication every day? Do you limit yourselves to two modes? Otherwise it can be a bit overwhelming and time consuming to email, phone, text, and leave cute messages on MySpace and/or Facebook.

People in long-distance relationships benefit greatly from all the technological advances. Couples separated by miles of land or ocean can converse via video chat, VOIP, or plain old text messaging. The ability to send racy photos and video instantly is certainly more tantalizing than verbose descriptions via letter or phone.

However immediately gratifying the online communication options can be, though, they can also be cold. There's something to be said for exchanging a handwritten letters with a lover. Emotions and passions can be better expressed through handwriting than through emoticons and l33t speak.

The official rule book will need to be rewritten to factor in web etiquette for daters. Never before has the temptation been so strong to give a one-night stand a fake name.

six stereotypes for single girls

Before settling down with the next person who enters the room, you should be aware that there are certain types of people that one must experience first. Getting these guys out of the way will allow you to fully appreciate the appropriate fellow when he stumbles face first into your lap.



1. The Artist

Whether a writer, painter, or musician, his soul is tortured and he must be known. He'll write poetry for you, paint portraits of you, and serenade you outside your apartment. When you leave him, he'll still be inspired by you, but his tone may be a little different.



2. The Sexy Foreigner

Accents can be alluring when they differ from your own. In the interest of improving international relations, try a brief encounter with an exotic tongue. Do a little research on your swarthy sweetie's native land to avoid any cultural faux pas. And steer clear of any dowry offerings on the first date.



3. The Intellectual

He'll woo you with quotes from Sartre, and his analysis of classic literature can make things steamy, if you're a librarian. This one is good to take to the parents, to show them you're making some use of your college education.



4. The Geek

Computer nerds are not exactly the sexiest men on the planet. His discourse on Visual Basic and debates on Wi-Fi are likely to bore after a while. Bonuses include good hand/eye coordination and his ability to upgrade your computer. And you never know what he's hiding in his pocket protector.



5. The Rebel

What better way to travel the road to romance than from the back of a Harley? Indulge in your rebellious phase and find a Fonzie who's guaranteed to make you say "aaay." And if you're lucky, you might find a chivalrous Hell's Angel who will get into a bar brawl over you.



6. The Handyman

He's the modern-day hero answering the calls of damsels in distress. He'll handle the heavy lifting, make household repairs, and even take a look at your plumbing. To keep him around, offer him a chilled beverage once in a while. If you're lucky, he won't be the only one working up a sweat.



how not to screw up your chances for a second date

Courage. You finally mustered enough of it to call up your obsession du jour and convince him to take you out for a meal you'll be too nervous to eat and a movie you have no interest in watching. From the moment you hang up the phone, it increasingly seems like a bad idea. You have the choice of going with your instinct and bailing on the date or muddling through and pretending to have a good time.

First dates are notoriously awkward. It is the time you and a virtual stranger try each other out to decide whether to proceed with the courtship ritual or resort to a one-night stand. Palms perspire, hearts jump, and the butterflies in your stomach induce involuntary bulimia. It's all part of the dating process. Once the hyperventilating subsides, take a look at the following ways you can avoid a disastrous date.

Ask questions to discover your date's interests and passions. Playing the role of interviewer can fill in gaps in awkward pauses and conversation lulls. If your date is on the quiet side, this will open him up and give the impression that you're into him. Be careful not to ask too many or too personal questions. Save the income, marriage, and baby questions for later dates. Speaking of marriage, it is okay to make sure he's single. The last thing you want to find when you're snooping through his files later is a marriage certificate and no copies of divorce papers.

Dress comfortably. Wear the clothes that make you feel sexy and confident. Ill-fitting garments will have you tugging and adjusting all night.

Keep the conversation current and relevant. Don't delve too much into your past and do not discuss previous relationships. It is common to have a first date with someone following a breakup, but your new beau doesn't need to hear all the gory details of the old one. He does need to hear how his shirt complements his eye color.

Be truthful. Nerves and the desire to make a good first impression may cloud common sense and cause you to do or say things out-of-character. Although it might be fun to pretend to have a glamorous career or know how to drive a motorcycle when meeting strangers in a bar, it's not such a good idea when trying to establish the groundwork for a relationship. Be prepared to back up any outrageous claims you make.

Show off your playful side. This doesn't mean you should dance on the bar with your top off (unless that's your thing). But even if the guy turns out not to be Mr. Fabulous, there's no reason to turn all sour puss and boycott fun for the rest of the date. Make a few quips about the movie, start up a game

of table football, or shoot your straw wrapper across the table at dinner. Do whatever fits your personality and will keep you relaxed.

Don't send mixed signals. If you're not having a great time or you're sure this is a one-time-only outing with this guy, let him know. Tell him up front that you don't see a second date in your future and wish him well. The worst thing you can do is lead him on to believe something will transpire between you, physically or emotionally.

Make the first move. When the date is going well and you want things to progress to a more physical level, take matters into your own hands. Grab his hand, grab his butt, plant a kiss on his lips. Go only as far as you feel comfortable, though, and don't tease your date into thinking he's getting around all the bases on the first night if you won't follow through.

These tips won't guarantee a successful date or ensure a lasting relationship with the guy in question; it's up to you to make that happen. But if you follow them, you may end up having a good time, and maybe you won't wake up hating yourself the next morning. Now that you have the date under control, you can concentrate on first kiss execution.



psychology and the single girl

So last week was your big first date with the girl you met at the bookstore. The whole evening went smoothly, and after you kissed her on the cheek, you said, "I'll call you." But though you totally meant it at the time, several days have already passed. You may think you're playing it cool, but she's been pacing the floors since the morning after.

Even the most cool and collected women are prone to single-girl psychosis. Some might say that puzzling over the progress of romance is part of the fun. Women will go over minutiae of every date like cable news political pundits. Every kiss, conversation, and awkward silence will go under the microscope. And what you don't say is as important as what you do say.

When guys aren't around, women are more likely to don lab

coats than lingerie as we dissect dates and pose theories about our men's behavior. Whether she's looking for the upper hand or just trying to figure out where you stand, she's going to review and analyze every moment of your time together. But you're not the only one undergoing scrutiny. It's as much about her actions and reactions as yours.

Did I come on too strong? Was I too slutty? Did I talk about my ex too much? How was my hair? Was there something in my teeth? Did he notice my staring at his hairline? Is he wearing a toupee? Wait...why can't I remember what color his eyes are? Maybe I shouldn't have laughed so hard at his racist joke. What kind of guy tells that kind of joke on a first date? Was it a test? Did I fail?

By the time you do get the nerve to call, she's already run through several scenarios and broken up with you four different ways. She's also killed your grandmother, run your car off a bridge, cursed all your friends for convincing you not to call, and given you a wife, children, and a few lifestyle changes. She may have even talked herself out of being interested in you.

This is not to say all the craziness lies solely within women. Both genders are equally capable of picking apart their partners. We're working toward similar goals—figuring out what our partner wants and planning the next move. If both parties can rise above the brain teasers and head games, there may be a chance to move beyond a first date.



gift giving in the 21st century

Once upon a time, roses were a true symbol of romance. Girls dreamed of making love on a bed covered in rose petals, being showered with them on holidays and special occasions, or being presented with a solitary bud at the close of a romantic date. What we got was the thorny side of a nice sentiment. These days, the rose has become the equivalent of a Blockbuster gift certificate.

More often than not, roses (or flowers in general) are passed off as gifts at the last minute. She'll know you forgot her birthday if you show up at her doorstep twenty minutes late wielding wilting weeds.

Of course there are other reasons beyond guilt and forgetfulness to grab the nearest bouquet. Flowers are generally nonthreatening. They don't conjure negative self-

imagery like boxes of chocolate. They don't raise expectations like lingerie. And they don't dredge up commitment issues like jewelry. In fact, the only message flowers send is the one you inscribe on the card. Which is why you should avoid hasty scribbling if you don't want more trouble. For example, don't write, "This is a symbol of our love" unless you really want to say, "Our love, like this bouquet, is expensive and will eventually rot and die."

As we continue forward into the 21st century, most of us are no longer content with traditional ideas of romance. We don't seek white knights or glass slippers, and we don't have the time to care for lifeless roses and lifeless relationships.

Some women still fancy a rose once in a while, but you have a better chance at winning her over with sincere trinkets that she can cherish forever. Depending on the level of your relationship, you can give her everything from personalized CDs to home theater equipment, all without having her questioning your motives. Burn her a disc of your (or her) favorite MP3s, and she'll be just as sweet on you as if you'd given her pink carnations. Not sure of her tastes? Give her your favorite movie on DVD and she'll think you're finally letting her into your world.

If you want to take a more organic approach to romance, win her over with a scrapbook of ticket stubs and matchbooks from the places you've visited as a couple. Or exercise the right side of your brain by drawing a silly self-portrait, or write an intentionally sappy love poem about her. Should creativity not be your forte, well, that's why Hallmark was invented.

The important thing is that you make the effort to do something good for the woman you hope to share your bed with for an undetermined amount of time. Besides, if you're

going to drop twenty or eighty bucks on her, it might as well be on something you both can enjoy. She may follow suit and surprise you with that plasma screen you've been eyeing.

tongue wagglin'

If you haven't been trapped in an elevator for most of your life, you know that lovers communicate in many languages. The general consensus would have you believe that French is the official language of l'amour. Some choose to rely on plain English, while others use Pig Latin to divulge their deepest desires.

Communication is an important tool in relationships, regardless of your native tongue. It is imperative to inform your partner of your needs in a way with which you feel comfortable. Buy him presents that may hint as to what you want, point and grunt, or buy a naughty (or self-help) book and highlight the interesting sections. Do have some sort of dialogue with your love before she hands you divorce papers and takes you for everything you own and refuses to tell you why.



Baby Babble

Commonly spoken by new couples who want to express their fresh love. This dialect includes the use of cutesy pet names, cooing, and the advent of nonsensical words. Minor drooling may be involved. Bring a bib.



Dirty Talk

Couples looking to add spice in the boudoir may opt for language best reserved for after dark. Risque tongue-twisters may be accompanied by furry handcuffs and black leather masks. Not recommended for sensitive ears or gentle souls.



Pure Poetry

These literary lovers are most likely to practice the fine art of letterwriting. They are unafraid to express their fondness for each other in intricate detail with no shortage of flowery adjectives. An example of romantic prose is the comparison of eyes to moonbeams, a shimmering lake, or deer caught in headlights.



Body Language

Physical communication is ideal for the tongue-tied and speech-challenged. Bedroom eyes and nimble fingers serve these couples well, but it's not restricted to the touchy-feely set. Incorrect usage might result in broken hearts or pulled muscles. Stretch first.



undercover lovers

You would have better luck figuring the combination to a bank safe using fortune cookie lottery numbers than solving the relationship enigma. Still, off we go searching for the key to everlasting love. And time after stinking time our collective hearts are shocked by the electric fence of love.

If I were to ask you to define the term relationship, a majority of you might respond with “A bond between two people built on trust, honesty, and love.” It’s a lovely thought and certainly should be how a romantic relationship is defined. This does not translate well in reality. Two people may be all it takes to start a romance, but sooner or later you’ll find yourself in an emotional orgy. A best friend or a mother can blow all your relationship privacy to hell.

How can you prevent your intimate details from going public? Zip your lips instead of your trousers by conducting a secret affair.

The secret romance has been reserved for those stepping out on their partners. It is often considered tawdry and illicit. But why should it be limited to the shameful and the embarrassed? Why must everyone know that you've found your true love of the month? Of course, if it's been a while since you've had a significant person in your life, you may have just cause to scream it from the mountain tops. To avoid the risk of jinxing it, a quiet, undisclosed affair might be right up your alley.

Taking a cue from high-profile celebrities who prefer low-profile romances could prove beneficial. Celebrities frequently skirt around the issue of who's sleeping with whom by claiming to be "close friends."

In a secret romance, there's no imposed time frame to abide by. It's love, not a ticking bomb. Should you opt for a secret romance, you have the further option of never telling anyone or waiting for the right moment, like the apocalypse.

There are definite pluses to keeping hush-hush while you're gaga. You can take the time to familiarize yourself with your new lover and form your own opinions of him or her. To kiss and not tell can be a heady task, especially if you've got a magnificent fish on your line. But waiting to reveal your new beau to pals could pay off in the long run. If you discuss or introduce your beau to friends before you've spent ample together time, friendly observations may cloud your own judgment. If, however, you wait a year to bring him around and one of your amigas decides that she wants a round with him, you'll have had a good run with the guy. You might even be fed up with the sap and willing to pass him along.

Keeping your relationship on the Q.T. also allows for development without undue pressure. Nothing kills the

passion of a romance like a busybody incessantly inquiring about relationship status, naked fingers, and wedding bells. Of course, those same Nosy Nancys may insist on setting you up with a slew of nice personalities and family friends if they believe you to be unattached.

The greatest reason to have a secret affair is to maintain fiery loins and passionate encounters. Sharing something that no one else is privy to can be naughty and sexy. Sneaking gropes, stealing kisses, meeting in undisclosed locations—it's why adultery was invented!

If you already have a partner, there's nothing wrong with enhancing your romance by adding a few secret ingredients. Take opportunities to grab a knee under a restaurant table or share a passionate kiss in the elevator. Pretending to have an illicit affair can be just as much fun as actually having one. Put on a blonde wig if it helps. For kicks, make him wear the wig. But don't tell anyone; they just wouldn't understand.



the trouble with love triangles

After months of alternating between brushing up against strangers in social situations and sampling Ben & Jerry flavors at home, you've finally found the love of your life and the man with whom you'll spend the rest of your days. The trouble is, it's two different men.

Being the tip of the love triangle is a harrowing experience and much more stressful than a romantic interlude really should be. Give a guy two girls and he'll think he's halfway to a letter in *Penthouse*. Switch the genders and you're soon in a relationship relay race to the altar. The potential flaw in our gender is that we're easily enamored and more sentimental than the hairier sex.

Because men usually turn over the relationship reins to women, the bulk of responsibility and maintenance rests on

our spaghetti-strapped shoulders. Soon you're scheduling dates, scribbling down sibling names to keep them straight, downloading maps for restaurants across town, investing in a reversible picture frame—you'll need an assistant just to keep track of everything. Once in a while, there's a slip-up and you've double-booked, or asked Boyfriend #1 about his baby sister's operation when he's the youngest of four brothers. Luckily, guys tend to be less suspicious and chalk up bizarre behavior to "that time of the month."

How you split your time between the two is crucial to your survival and the quality of your relationship. For example, if you spend only weekends and non-PMS days with Boyfriend #1, he's getting a nicer, more relaxed version of you than Weekday Boyfriend. When the time arises to choose between them, Weekend Boyfriend might seem like the right choice because he's not as exasperated with you as Weekday Boyfriend, but the weekday guy sticks it out for some reason.

The dynamics of a relationship are not altered only by your behavior but by the guys' knowledge. Whether both are in on the situation or just the one you're seeing behind the primary boyfriend's back, with knowledge comes competition. Having two guys compete for your affection may double the gifts and the attention you get, but the prize is not just your heart. For some, it's merely a conquest, and you may be gradually phased out of his life after the battle is won.

With all good love triangles comes the inevitable choice. The love triangle wouldn't seem so scandalous if it weren't for that pesky concept of monogamy. Even though humans aren't necessarily monogamous creatures, we've been conditioned to find one partner with whom we'll spend an unspecified amount of time. But if you and your partners

don't subscribe to the "one mate for every person" idea, why choose? If you can handle juggling two or more guys at once, why deprive yourself of seeing how each relationship plays out without limiting the players?

Well, there's the guilt of knowing you aren't giving your all to each partner. And eventually the scheduling and the strategic plans, the dates across town, and rarely sleeping in your own apartment become tiresome. Sometimes it's nice to have the home bed advantage, to enjoy some solo pampering time, and to have to complain about your day only once.

And sometimes it isn't your choice. Maybe Weekend Boyfriend takes up with another woman and doesn't have your aptitude for balancing multiple relationships. Thank goodness for Mondays.



how to tell if you've got it

Butterflies flit away in your gut as he walks past you on the street. Weak knees buckle, causing you to “accidentally” trip him. Palms become slippery with sweat as you offer a “Hello, I’m sorry” handshake. Or a cat pounces on your head and sinks furious claws into your tongue as a compliment to this sexy stranger stumbles out of your mouth.

Yes, the signs of attraction can be sickeningly obvious, especially to those who have the misfortune of slipping on a puddle of your drool. But although attraction and physical chemistry are easily identified, indications of a perfect match are somewhat more elusive. Science can back up the reasons for hooking up, but love and monogamy defy and confound all logic.

Finding The One relies heavily on whether or not you believe there is one true mate for every person. If you think predestined love is a load of bunk, congratulations! You’ve

just made your quest for love infinitely easier. Some matches may be more suitable than others, but none are guaranteed.

Humans are in a constant state of evolution. As we adapt to our various environments and rapidly changing fads, personalities and appearances alter as well. Not everyone evolves at the same rate. The person you fancy now may not be The One once he discovers underground industrial music or she moves to New Hampshire for a change of pace. Still, no reason why you can't enjoy his or her company now, and nothing stops him from finding a pierced beauty who produces industrial music in the future. The point is that combining human nature with the fickleness of love makes pinpointing the right person a completely maddening experience.

So, how do you determine if you have stumbled upon the one great love of your life? A friend once said, "If you can stand his morning breath, you'll know it's meant to be." Morning breath is a great excuse for ending a relationship but hardly qualifies as a sign of everlasting love, no matter how fresh.

Searching for love is essentially like looking for a good pair of jeans. Through trial and error, you try on different sizes of various brands to find a flattering pair. Occasionally you can luck out with the first pair you try, but it's so rare an occasion that you may throw it back on the shelf just to make sure.

Keep in mind that finding and identifying true love is one thing; maintaining it is quite another. Just like the perfect jeans, you'll have to work at making sure they still fit and keeping them free of rips and unfortunate laundry mishaps.

While you continue your search for The One or Mr. Right
Now, open your mind and your heart to new possibilities. An
unexpected sappy sentiment, but hey, you might as well
make the most of your time in the dressing room.

guide to pet names

Addressing a partner by a nickname is one of those cutesy habits that couples tend to adopt early on. These pet names can change and evolve over time and serve as good indicators of the state of the relationship. But the quality and variety of these love handles depend on the creativity of the users.

If you're looking for clever alternatives to using your partner's given name in private or social settings, take a few points under advisement. Romantic pet names should be esteem-boosting. They should make women should feel delicate and lovely; men, strong and virile.

Instead of opting for an old standard or picking something just for the sake of being cute, try pulling inspiration from your relationship or qualities of your partner. Base your terms of endearment on her favorite flower or birthstone. Doing this has the added bonus of helping you remember these facts for important occasions. Should you forget her birthday but remember her birthstone, just plug it into Google, and you can at least get the right month.

Once your relationship has run its course, the pet names need to be retired. It would be in bad taste to recycle them into a new relationship, no matter how good they were.

This guide offers a few categories to inspire your new pet names.

Animal Magnetism

positive

stallion
 chickadee
 kitten
 puppy
 lamb
 bunny
 deer
 tiger

negative

cow
 pig
 buzzard
 crow
 dodo
 opossum
 porcupine
 sloth

questionable

platypus
 monkey
 ostrich/emu
 alpaca
 dolphin

If it's small, fuzzy, and cute, or indicates sexual prowess, it's probably acceptable. If it's fat, lazy, or stubborn, you'll have more luck sleeping at the zoo.

Edible Complex**positive**

muffin
 pumpkin
 cupcake
 apple
 sweet pea
 honey
 cocoa bean

negative

tart
 dumpling
 vegetable
 potato
 linguini
 broccoli
 Hot Pocket™

questionable

tomato
 zucchini
 Pop Tart™
 macadamia nut
 Moon Pie™

Baked goods are popular pet name options but could offend the weight-sensitive. Organic foodstuffs might fare better than, say, sodium benzoate.

Garden Variety**positive**

sunflower
 blossom
 honeysuckle
 lily

negative

poison ivy
 cactus
 ragweed
 Venus fly trap
 narcissus

questionable

dandelion
 pansy
 pussy willow
 chrysanthemum

No matter what color your thumb may be, the floral

department is tricky pet name territory. Pretty petals aren't always labeled with tongue-friendly monikers.

Natural Phenomena

positive

starlight
moonbeam
rainbow
dewdrop
snowflake

negative

rain cloud
dust speck
pond scum
puddle
icicle

questionable

rock
kudzu
mountain
cumulonimbus

Look for inspiration as far away from Earth's surface as possible. Think light and ethereal. Few romantic substances exist in actual nature. Stupid gravity.



an exclusive offer

You've found someone willing to return your calls and tolerate you in public settings. It's a rare treat, one that you don't want to risk spoiling. But there comes a time when you must make it known that you intend to continue calling on this person (and only this person) for an unspecified amount of time.

The decision to dedicate oneself to a monogamous relationship isn't as clear cut as it might've been in the past. These days relationships have more levels than Super Mario Bros. Monogamy doesn't always lead directly to marriage, so becoming exclusive is just one more level in the dating game.

Long gone are the days of pitching woo to one's beloved beau. Women are much less likely to court multiple suitors until one makes some grand romantic gesture. The way we approach love in this era is far more casual—in an effort to

guard ourselves against appearing too vulnerable and facing rejection. Instead of pursuing a potential partner, the two enter a “talking” stage. If the conversation is convincing enough, they decide to “hang out.” What happens when someone wants to go beyond “just having fun”? In a time of evasive and noncommittal definitions of romance, how can you signify to a suitor that you’d like to make him your beau?

The structure of the romantic relationship has changed over the years. As our lifestyles became more sedentary, so did our relationships. Today, a single date can comprise several days of video gaming and movie watching in bed, with a little sex and Chinese food thrown in somewhere. Our romantic intentions are no less pure than those of the dinner-and-dancing generation, but the boundaries are blurred. We’re much more likely to roll over one morning and say, “I’m not seeing anyone else, are you? No? Cool.”

Tremendous romantic gestures can be costly and not necessarily every girl’s dream. However casual we’ve become, though, there’s still a secret thrill in being able to call someone boyfriend (or girlfriend). And that may be all the gesture necessary. A girl may not need to be swept off her feet and carried through the door or up a grand staircase, but she hopes for something a little classier than his peeing with the door open.

Some couples just evolve organically. But if you’re trying to tame someone who’s accustomed to sowing wild oats, you may require a little more definition. Blatant honesty and open communication are always the best ways to find out if you are or are not. Sit down with your potential new boyfriend and lay down some terms for when you decide to become exclusive.

However you and your partner choose to declare your mutual exclusivity, take pride in the ability to make a commitment in an increasingly noncommittal society.



meet her makers

In a perfect world, her family would welcome you into their home with open arms. Having heard glorious praises in your name, they would offer you a standing invitation to all family functions. Her father would allow you to sit in his big papa chair and insist you join him at major sporting events. His mother would become fast friends with you and take you on pleasant shopping excursions.

But this is not a perfect world. Even if your beloved thinks you are perfection personified, her parents will search for anything to hold against you. From the moment they open the door, all eyes will be on you and flaw detectors powered up full steam. After all, you're dating their baby—the golden child, fruit of their loins, a treasure of which you are not worthy. To them, you are a criminal (you did steal their little girl's heart) and must be stopped at any cost. You may want to watch for land mines on the way to the washroom. Perhaps not quite so dire, but parents will always believe

that no one is good enough for their precious virginal prize.

For a first meeting, suggest going out for dinner. As you may have learned on many first dates, restaurants provide plenty of distractions—menus to hide behind, waiters disrupting, and a cleverly planned bout of food poisoning could clear you from any heavy-duty conversations.

Dinner at the family house is not simply a meal shared among family and new friends—it's a test of survival. Initial greetings and chitchat are followed by an intense interrogation. The interrogation room appears harmless enough, disguised as a cheerful living room adorned with knickknacks and artifacts from your beloved's childhood.

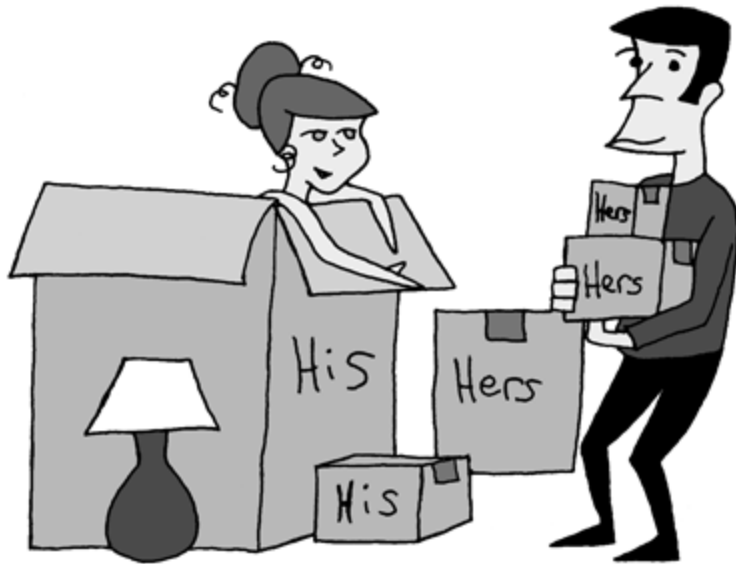
Once you have satisfactorily answered all questions, dinner will be served. Siblings, visiting family members, and pets will emerge from the woodwork to meet you. Charming characters may include the religious grandmother and the happily married sister and her spouse. You will desperately seek a bond with this other outsider and you will fail.

After dinner, while you're breaking out your best yawns and watch glances, the parents haul out old scrapbooks filled with photos of your love in various stages of life.

Strategically placed photos of an old flame will give parents the opening for discussing "that nice boy you let slip away" and wondering whatever happened to him. Your sweetheart should use this chance to discuss your many positive qualities.

Finally, the parents grow tired of you. They thank you for coming; you thank them for having you. They tell their darling child that they will phone the next day. That phone call will seal your fate with this family.

If you wish to avoid this and similar tense situations, keep your relationships meaningless and commitment-free. Beg your beloved not to mention you to her parents. Failing that, make a vow to date orphans.



your place or mine

After an unspecified amount of time—and countless walks of shame—you’ve decided to try living together. But cohabitation is more than being able to tolerate his morning breath and no longer needing to slather on a face full of makeup before dawn. There are things to consider before loading up the moving truck.

Every relationship has a different dynamic and moves at a different pace. While it’s not unreasonable to think about cohabitation after six months, there may be other factors if he’s itching to move in after dating six weeks. What’s his motivation? Eviction? Horrible roommate? Creditors? Pending divorce?

Even if you have been together a long time, make sure you’re not moving in just because you’re tired of paying rent for your own place. Or because you want someone else to make your dinner.

Using cohabitation as an alternative to marriage isn't quite as simple as you'd think. Depending on how much of your lives you agree to merge, it's not the same as taking in a roommate. Check state laws to see what constitutes a common-law marriage. If you find the idea of being legally bound to another person in any way off-putting, maybe it's best to live in the same neighborhood instead.

Yours, mine, or ours? Once you decide to share living space with a romantic partner, the hardest part is deciding whose living space to share. If he owns and you rent, it might be easier to share his house. That is, if you can get beyond the idea that other women may have been entertained in that very domicile.

Picking one home over another has the potential to change the relationship dynamic. He'll have permanent home-bed advantage. She may be inflexible in adjusting her home decor to fit your belongings.

The benefit of sharing a new space, untainted by previous mates and sexual conquests, is creating a home that suits your personality as a couple, rather than two individuals. You can develop a new style or find a clever way to merge your existing decor. Who says dragons and unicorns can't share a curio cabinet?

Secret quirks, habits, and ickiness are harder to keep private once there's someone else banging on the bathroom door. Either give up the toenail biting or risk some serious gross-out moments.

If you're determined to make the move from lovers to domestic partners, give each other plenty of breathing room. Minor squabbles about whether the toilet paper roll is over

or under can turn into a massive blowout if you don't have your own corners. Designate a room or area to escape to when things get heated. When you've cooled off, adjourn to the bedroom to stoke the embers.



you brought 'er, you adulterer

Cheating requires a lot of work. It can be physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausting. To cheat effectively, one must have excellent time management skills, ninja-like stealth, and the ability to keep a secret. Stamina helps, too.

The need to stray from a current partner stems from that need to feel desired. In established couples, the mutual desirability may be diminished to some extent or merely taken for granted. In a desperate attempt to recapture that feeling of sexual attractiveness, one may turn one's attentions outside of the existing coupledness.

Cheating doesn't necessarily have to be sexual. Whatever quality you feel is lacking in your relationship, you may seek it out in another. An emotional connection with someone else can be just as dangerous to a relationship as a sexual

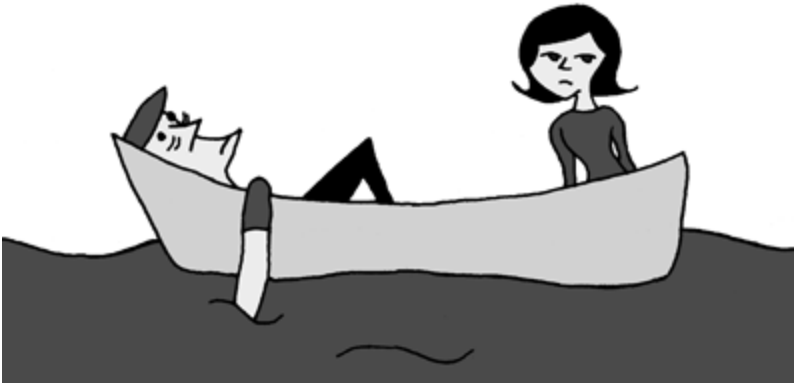
connection. Regardless of bedroom antics, if you find the time spent with your new friend to be greater than time spent with your partner, it may be time to re-evaluate the situation.

If your relationship is on the rocks, sometimes all it takes is a dose of flattery to turn your head. And if the source of flattery is moderately attractive, you may need an exorbitant amount of will power to resist literally falling into that person's lap.

Unless you're having a string of meaningless one-night stands on the side, you're essentially involved in two relationships. You're keeping track of two birthdays, two anniversaries, two sets of personal information to keep straight, two sets of expenses. You may be getting double the sex but you're going on as many dates. Then there are the gifts to keep one quiet and gifts to keep the other placated. You'll also become a master of fake work phone calls.

No one really wins at infidelity. You'll run ragged trying to keep the affair quiet and not get caught. And if you get caught and are forced to choose between your partner and your mistress, neither relationship will continue on steady ground. Your partner may never fully trust you again. Your mistress will always be suspicious that you're cheating on her...hey, you did it once.

Lovers are not baseball cards. The players may want to round all the bases, but you can't collect them all.



seven habits of highly ineffective couples

Relationships take work. Much like a goldfish won at a county fair, your relationship needs love and attention in order to survive. Assuming you want it to survive. Without the right amount of nurturing, your relationship and the goldfish will be found belly up by morning. In the spirit of Franklin Covey and his highly effective habits and products, I have found seven common bad habits of couples and maybe a few suggestions on how to repair and salvage your floundering goldfish, er, relationship.

1. Getting too close, too quick. Whirlwind romances, no matter how magical they seem, don't always have those fairytale endings. Trade your romanticisms for cynicism and discover his dark secrets. If it's really love, elopement can wait a week or until those police reports come back.

2. Dishonesty. We're all guilty of a few little white lies. There's no harm in hiding prematurely gray hair or fibbing about that few extra pounds, right? Once you decide to spend every waking moment with someone, though, it's

time to wield the truth stick. Give your lover the chance to decide whether he can handle the fact that you have six kids, had a bout of the clap, and want him to wear your undergarments. If you don't feel comfortable telling your partner the truth, get out and find someone you will be comfortable with.

3. Jealousy. Does the thought of your partner in the same room with someone of the opposite sex have you turning green? Don't use your jealousy as an excuse to become inseparable as a couple. Allow your partner to see his or her friends and use the time apart to visit some of your own neglected chums. If you're afraid that your love might meet someone one else while you're in separate rooms, learn a few unique tricks that will surely return him to your arms at the end of the night.

4. Cheating. By nature, humans are not monogamous creatures. Survival of the fittest drives us to seek out greener pastures, especially if the current relationship has grown stale. By becoming emotionally involved with someone, you temporarily surrender your right to partake of the flesh of others. If your romance has run ashore, you have to do something with the dead fish rotting on the boat's floor before dipping your rod back into the pond. Discuss the new developments with your current and fish around for possible solutions.

5. Loss of sexual interest. Sexual desire can wane once you've been together a certain amount of time. You have become familiar with all your lover's parts and moves, so familiar that they may not excite you like before. You don't need a tow truck to get out of a sexual rut. Simply pick up a copy of the Kama Sutra, grab some massage oil and Saran Wrap, and surprise your partner with a few new twists.

6. Neglecting your partner. Even if you're married, there's no guarantee that your beloved will stick around forever. Sometimes work, friends, family, pets, or a paper cut can distract you. Once you get into the comfort zone and ease back into your regularly scheduled life, it's easy to leave your lover behind.

Paying attention to your partner doesn't necessarily mean being in each other's faces, though that can't hurt. No, it's the small doses of tenderness that count and rack up the most points. Leave a note on her pillow, slip an article of your clothing into his briefcase, or hide inexpensive (yet meaningful) trinkets around the house.

7. Lack of communication. Without communication, you basically have a steady, mediocre booty call. Communication is more than sitting down to discuss problem areas and issues you may have with one another. It's the mindless drivel and the chit-chat, during television commercials, about music and world events. Body language plays a major role in communication and not just in the bedroom. The way you behave and carry yourself can clue your partner in on how you're feeling, even if you're not willing to vocalize. A snarl is worth a thousand grumbles. If you don't communicate with your lover, how will you ever know when he's ready to leave a boring party?

The problem with happily ever after is there's more to ever after than meets the eye. To hold onto Prince Charming, Snow White has to be willing to do more than sing with the bluebirds. If you are willing to put forth the effort to keep the relationship alive, then you'll have a healthy goldfish for a while. Should it die, don't dwell too long. There's always the county fair next year.



how to tell when you don't got it

Unless you've been plotting your breakup since the third date, the end of a relationship can sneak up on you. There's a reason it's called "fizzling out." That's because you often don't realize the flame has burned out until you smell the smoke.

Sometimes relationships drive into a rut. Real life eventually takes precedence over romance and you just start to coexist. Once the new partner smell wears off, you stop showing her off to friends and take her for granted and drive-thru grub. The volcanic ash clears from your romantic eruption, and as the dust settles, so do the two of you. A rut—marked by either sexual drought or lack of structured dates—can be escaped if you're willing to make the effort. Unfortunately, there's no romantic equivalent of AAA.

How do you know when the relationship is done? It's over when you realize that you're no longer invested in your partner. Let's say he goes on a trip to Vegas with his buddies. Are you concerned when he doesn't call? Are you more annoyed when he comes back and apologizes for not calling than the fact that he went at all? Do you secretly hope he hooked up with a stripper to give you a convenient out?

You don't have to wait for smoke signals for indications that your romance is in trouble. Behavior modification is a major sign. The play fighting and gentle nitpicking becomes less playful and gentle. You put physical distance between yourselves—from sitting on separate sides of the room to showing up for parties and social events alone. Couple activities become more rare. When he calls, you let the voice-mail pick up.

Perception of your partner can change as well. She sees you as a bank instead of a beau. You introduce her as your friend or roommate. Strangers ask if you're siblings.

Calling it quits is easier when you didn't have much invested in the relationship at the start. If you've been in it just for a few meals, a couple of rounds of mini-golf, and some condoms, parting ways may only sting a little. Once you've merged hearts and belongings, untangling gets trickier. The couple—together and as individuals—must determine whether admitting it's over is worth the hassle of moving costs, house hunting, and fighting over the DVD collection.

It may take two to form a couple, but only one to tear asunder. And the other one might not share your recent epiphany. In most breakup cases, the end of a relationship sneaks up on one half and whacks the other upside the head

with a mallet. If you're a kindhearted person, you won't end your relationship with actual physical violence.



break hearts, not bones

So you've realized that the person sleeping next to you is not your one true love. As you watch the drool from your lover's mouth collect on your favorite pillow, you briefly consider dragging her out to the curb before she wakes. Instead, you search for a polite way to say "You're no longer welcome here. Please gather your belongings and leave the premises immediately."

You can abandon a relationship at any time. Admittedly, the longer you are together, the more difficult—and perhaps costly—the eventual split. Some breakups are clean cuts. Both parties are aware of all the issues, and a mutual split is reached quickly and easily. So quickly and easily, in fact, that you might be tempted to rethink your breakup. Most breakups are painful. They are messy, tearstained ordeals that can leave you questioning love, your sexual preferences, and life in general.

Everyone wants a pleasant breakup. You want to emerge unscathed and feeling that you did the right thing. No one wants to live in fear of psycho stalker exes who will leave creepy comments on MySpace.

If you're really over the person, don't take the passive route. Changing your behavior in order to get dumped instead of doing the deed yourself is like running water over a Band-Aid !" and hoping it'll just drop off. Rip the damn thing off and deal with a few missing hairs. It's better than leaving your ex in a sopping wad near the shower drain.

Be truthful with your reasons for breaking up. Don't use oddball excuses like "my therapist thinks I should stop seeing you because you look like my mother" or "I'd just wind up hurting you in the future." The real truth may hurt, but withholding is doing a disservice to all parties involved. If there's no hope for reconciliation, leave no traces of possibility.

The trick to a successful breakup is to balance out your reasons for splitting with some positive qualities you still recognize in your future former flame. Spare your partner's feelings, and maybe she'll act in kind. Take all the blame with the old "it's not you, it's me" chestnut and throw in a good "you deserve better" to alleviate some of the pain.

If you both handle your split amicably, there's always the chance for a platonic friendship in the future.



keepsake disposal for the recently dumped

It's over and you want all traces of him gone. Into a box goes the ticket stub from your first concert together, the ugly stuffed elephant he won at the state fair, and the bottle of cold medicine he brought when you were sick. What do you do with the stuff once you've boxed it?

The romantic gesture is to set it afire or pitch into the nearest river, preferably near some beautiful vista at sunset. However romantic or cathartic that might seem, it's not the most environmentally friendly method of disposal.

How you choose your keepsake disposal may be influenced by the length of the expired relationship, how sentimental you are, and who initiated the dumping. If there's a glimmer of a chance that you might get back together, you may shove the box into the back of a closet. If you're feeling spiteful, you could drop the box in front of his house. Or mail it to his mother with a letter detailing how her precious son ripped your heart into a million pieces.

Divesting yourself of these possessions can be liberating and free up some primo closet space. If that diamond ring doesn't shine for you anymore, someone else may be able to polish it up. Redistribute the gifts and rack up some karma points for yourself.

Give stuffed toys to charity. He might've spent \$50 trying to win that big purple elephant for you. It may be worthless to you now, but it could be a priceless new companion for a needy, elephant-less child.

Depending on quality and use, clothing can be donated, swapped, or sold on ebay. If it pains you too much to see your little cousin wearing the ugly sweater your ex bought you for Christmas last year, avoid passing items to family or close friends. You may need to chuck the intimates in the landfill, unless the items were never worn and retain the original tags.

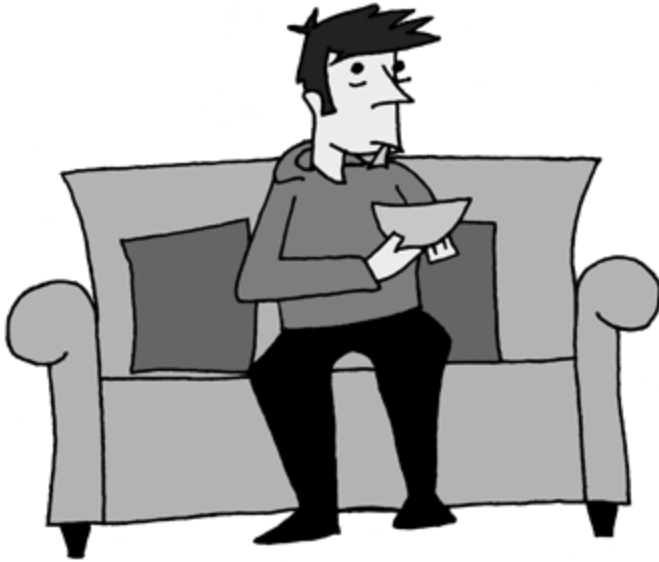
Remake & regift. Turn a t-shirt collection into a quilt. Instead of cutting him out of all your photos, give them the Anne Taintor treatment and paste pithy comments on them. Embrace your inner craftster and sell the results on Etsy.com.

An engagement ring should be returned to the one who purchased it. Even if he did the dumping, you shouldn't keep his two months' salary. Other jewelry can be kept, pawned, or regifted. Engraved trinkets may be harder to unload. If you don't want to hold onto them yourself, try giving them to your mom for safekeeping. If the engraved piece has your name or initials, you may be able to reintroduce it into your personal collection.

Keeping gifts obtained from former loves is a nice way to remember those you once deemed worthy to be let into your

heart and your pants. For the sake of nostalgia, it's healthy to hold onto one or two truly memorable, thoughtful gifts.

Whatever you do with the physical reminders, hold onto the memories. Relationships are learning experiences. From love, we learn what we want as well as what we don't want. Our rejections and successes help form us into bitter or better people.



alone again? naturally

Some love doesn't last forever. Body chemistry changes, beauty fades, and people just grow apart. Losing a lover doesn't mean you have to dive into the depths of despair and doughnuts. While it's okay to wallow for a while, eventually you'll be ready to resurface and you'll want your pants to fit.

Depending on the intensity of the breakup or your emotional investment in the former romance, a period of adjustment may be needed before seeking a new companion. Whether you were the dumper or the dumpee, consider taking some time to be partner-free. Use your post-breakup time as an opportunity to do a little post-game recap—review what worked in the relationship and where it went wrong. This evaluation could help you in future love connections.

Living single doesn't have the same social stigma as it did years ago. People are settling down at a more advanced age.

It's okay if you're still a swinging bachelor/ette in your mid-30s and 40s. The only one you've truly disappointed is your mother. And let's face it, mothers can't be pleased—just ask your father. Embrace the single life again—sprawl out on the bed or walk around naked without the sexual objectification. Do all those little things your partner hated.

Put distance between yourself and your ex. Remove them from your cell phone, email, and social networking groups. Eliminate the temptation to contact your ex for breakup sex, for drunken proclamations of love, or to brag about your latest sexual conquest. Save it all for the awkward meeting on the street, when you'll be glad that you're still able to fit into your skinny jeans.

Create an Ex Jar to curb your habit of starting sentences with "My girlfriend and I used to..." Drop some coinage in the jar every time you think about or discuss your ex. Extend this policy to friends and family who, even with your best interests in mind, frequently reference your former flame. Once you've collected some serious change, use the funds to buy something your ex never would've bought for you.

You may be tempted to make some physical changes to yourself. If you want to celebrate by getting a new tattoo or piercing, do so within reason. Rethink the full back tattoo of the mermaid with the volcano waterfall, especially if this is your first inking. Plastic surgery should not be considered in an attempt to win back an ex or to make them see what they're missing.

The pursuit of a new hobby or interest could be the healthiest way to mend a broken heart. Take up an activity that you once found mildly appealing but was rejected by your ex. Doing something previously forbidden or frowned upon can be liberating. It's fun, but also a nice little

imaginary jab at your ex. This new hobby or activity could also lead to new romantic possibilities. Which is more than your sofa, television, and generic ice cream can offer.

The most important thing you can do is reclaim your individuality. Our relationships tend to define who we are. We fine-tune ourselves to fit with our current partners—picking up new hobbies or interests. We may absorb our partner's behaviors and mannerisms. The person you were two partners ago may not be who you are now. Indulging in a little solitude will allow you to reset your individuality and set you on the path to better and healthier relationships.

afterword

There you have it—from why we pursue love to how to cope when it's lost—another book about love. Now it's ready to collect dust on your bookshelf or be regifted to an unsuspecting pal. If you found this book helpful, informative, or humorous in any way, please purchase additional copies for close friends and relatives. If you found the text dry, pedestrian, or irrelevant, please purchase copies for all those obligatory gift occasions.

The content of the book, with the exception of Just Say No to Love, was produced over the course of nine years. During eight of those years, I have been engaged in a longterm relationship. The essays written for my columns and this book bear no relation to my current relationship. Residual bitterness from prior failed romances may have slipped into earlier essays, but there are no direct references. My apologies to any ex-lovers who were hoping to sue me for libel.

About Katharine!

Katharine is the author of *The Curable Romantic: Advice for the Romance-Impaired*, the best-selling *30 Failures by Age 30*, and the author-illustrator of *BORIS: Robot of Leisure*. Katharine also an artist and graphic designer specializing in low-brow pop art inspired by 20th century popular culture. Katharine's paintings, part of her *Robot of Leisure* series, have been exhibited in galleries and public spaces across North America. View more of her work at thatkatharine.com.